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A CHILDREN'S PLAY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN¹

HARRY KENDALL BASSETT
University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
Summer Session Picnic
Observatory Hill
Friday, July 28, 1911

"SWEETBRIAR"

A Pastoral

by

DOROTHEA GORE BROWNE

Persons

Roger of the Holt, *in love with Awdrey*

Robin Hood and Will Scarlet, *outlaws*

Peter Hucklebag, *a miser*

Astrologer

Miller

Gleeman

Awdrey, *Lady of the Manor*

Cicely, *her friend*

Almira, *a child*

Attendants, Outlaws, etc.

ACT I

Scene. A grass plot in front of Awdrey's Manor House

Time. May Day, about the year 1200, and Awdrey's birthday

Awdrey, Cicely, Attendants in Procession, Gleeman, Roger, and others

ACT II

Scene. An Astrologer's Turret Chamber

Astrologer, Peter, Almira, and Witches

ACT III

Scene. A Chamber in the Manor

Awdrey, Cicely, and others

ACT IV

Scene. A Forest

Awdrey and Cicely, Robin Hood and his men, all others

¹ Worked out as illustrative material for the author's classes in the study of the Festival.

SYNOPSIS

On May Day all the attendants of the Manor House come to present greetings and gifts to the Lady Awdrey. Roger, bringing a young bird as his offering, is rebuffed by Awdrey. Peter attempts to use this incident as means for furthering his plan of acquiring Awdrey's property. He seeks the aid of an old astrologer and his incantations. His schemes move on successfully until, attempting to make prisoners of Awdrey and Roger, he is surprised in the forest by Robin Hood. Through the gallant outlaw's intervention, Peter's villainies are exposed and the course of true love is made to run as it should.

Heigh for the greenwood in the spring!
What better life can the seasons bring,
To the velvet mole in his earthy dome,
To the small brown bird in his leafy home?
Heigh for the greenwood in the spring!
Woodlanders all they love to sing.

Yes, it is a picnic and when, at six-thirty, a tucket is sounded by two horns to the four points of the compass, the picnickers and some hundreds of others gather on the slope to witness a play.

It is a delightful English pastoral by Dorothea Gore Browne, and as the synopsis indicates, embraces a wide variety in character and in action. There is also much of good, rollicking song and merry dancing.

The actors are children, some forty of them, in ages ranging from five to fifteen years. They enjoy the presentation as much as does the audience. The time devoted to preparation and rehearsal has been so short that no one is tired and worn out.

The setting is Nature's own—a gentle slope, at the foot of which a background of branches has been arranged to mark off the stage. The audience looks out over the stage and to the orchard and lake beyond. A glorious sunset adds its color to the picture.

The costuming is simple but effective. Thought has been taken for the setting and the period of the action, but the children have been given the opportunity to choose colors and suggest materials.

The entire play, including the May Pole dance and several charming little folk-dances, is less than sixty minutes in length and so has just fitted into the twilight hour. The evening is given over to the older ones, who join in game and dance out here on the hilly green.

In the preparation of this little play there was practically nothing of the schoolroom atmosphere, for this was the holiday time. Then, too, the little people were recruited from all over the

city, so there was little of that neighborhood or school spirit upon which the teacher may rely. The whole affair was arranged and made ready in less than two weeks, and in the preparation there was the same co-operation one should find in the school. The music was a large factor; there was valuable assistance in the preparation of the dances from the department of physical education; the mothers gave cordially of their time and interest. Though it was an out-of-door performance, there was comfort for the audience because the children enunciated well, there was no straining for effect, and throughout there was naturalness, spontaneity, and joy.

Just here, it seems to me, are the danger points in dramatic presentations by children. Too much emphasis is placed on the *finish* of the production, not enough emphasis on the value of the preparation to the children. Too much time is often given to the preparation; I am not advocating *inadequate* preparation, but we are prone to eliminate all spontaneity and naturalness; the children lose interest and make hard work of that which should be real pleasure. Undue labor and expense are put upon the costumes and the stage setting; we seek to leave nothing to the imagination of either actors or audience.

Finally, these simple little plays and dramatizations should be considered as educational tools, not ends in themselves.